



Failing to commit: Maximizers avoid commitment in a way that contributes to reduced satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Past research suggests that individuals who approach decisions with the goal of maximizing, or selecting the best possible option, show less satisfaction with their choices than those with the goal of satisficing, or selecting the first “good enough” option. The present investigation examines whether this difference in choice satisfaction stems from a difference in willingness to commit to one’s choices. We argue that maximizers are reticent to commit to their choices and that this reticence robs them of the dissonance reduction processes that leave people satisfied. In Study 1, maximizers reported a stronger preference than satisficers for retaining the possibility to revise choices, both when reporting preferences in their own life and when choosing between options in a hypothetical situation. In Study 2, satisficers showed evidence of classic dissonance reduction after making a choice – they offered higher ratings of a chosen poster and lower ratings of the rejected alternatives, relative to baseline. However, maximizers were less likely to change their impressions of the posters after their choice, leaving them less satisfied with their selected poster. These results provide valuable insight into post-decision processes that decrease maximizers’ satisfaction with their decisions.

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1. Introduction

Many of the choices we make, regarding whom to marry, what job to accept, or even which movie to watch, are intended to make us happy. We try to make wise choices that will leave us satisfied. That said, it is not always possible to know what is the best choice. Herbert Simon (1955) argued that it is rarely possible to review all possible options in detail and identify the single best choice. He argued that, instead, people tend to satisfice, or select an option that is “good enough,” in that it meets a minimum threshold of acceptability.

More recent research has demonstrated individual differences in the degree to which people seek to “maximize” by identifying and selecting the best possible choice option or to “satisfice” by selecting the first option that is “good enough” (Schwartz et al., 2002). Those who strive to make the best decisions (maximizers) do not seem to benefit from this mindset, relative to their satisficing peers. Maximizers tended to make better decisions by objective standards. For example, among graduating students, maximizers found jobs with starting salaries that were 20% higher than satisficers (Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006). By objective standards, maximizers achieved better outcomes, however they reported lower satisfaction with those jobs than their satisficing peers. Similarly,

maximizers tend to be more likely than satisficers to report regret and depression, in general, and show lower happiness, optimism and self-esteem, compared to satisficers (Schwartz et al., 2002).

At least one reason that maximizers show less satisfaction is that they make decisions in very different ways than satisficers. Maximizers spend more time reviewing options when making a choice than do satisficers (Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009). This exhaustive decision process has been argued to increase maximizers’ uncertainty that they have found the best choice (e.g. Iyengar et al., 2006).

The present investigation examines whether maximizers show less commitment to their choices than satisficers in a way that leaves them less satisfied with their choices. We propose that maximizers’ focus on finding the best option undermines their commitment to choices. As a result, we argue, maximizers miss out on the psychological benefits of commitment, leaving them less satisfied than satisficers.

Past research has focused on how maximizers and satisficers might differ *while making a choice* (e.g., Dar-Nimrod et al., 2009). However, little is known about how this individual difference influences processes occurring *after* the choice is made. Because maximizers want to be certain that they have made the “right” choice, we argue that they are less likely to fully commit to a decision. Identifying the “right” choice can be a never-ending task. Feelings about which option is best can always change in the face of new information. Maximizers might be unable to fully embrace

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a choice because they cannot be absolutely certain they chose the best possible option. Therefore, we predict, maximizers are likely to feel less committed to their choices than satisficers.

Past research is consistent with the argument that maximizers feel less committed to their choices than satisficers. First, maximizers seek to verify that they have chosen the “right” option more often than satisficers. [Iyengar et al. \(2006\)](#) found that maximizers relied more on other external sources of information than satisficers when evaluating potential jobs, such as advice from career service centers, expert rankings, and advice from family members. Maximizers also report engaging in more social comparison both before and after making a choice than do satisficers, indicating that they are continuing to look for evidence that they have made the best choice even after making a decision ([Schwartz et al., 2002](#)). When engaged in a job search, maximizers fantasized more than satisficers about having additional options, indicating they might have been uncomfortable committing to an available option before they verified that they had identified the best ([Iyengar et al., 2006](#)). Second, maximizers engage in more post-decision processing than satisficers, including counterfactual thinking and social comparison ([Schwartz et al., 2002](#)), suggesting a continuing lack of commitment even after an option has been selected.

To the degree that maximizers commit to their decisions less than satisficers, they should be less likely to experience the benefits of commitment. After making a decision, a wealth of research suggests that people reduce cognitive dissonance about their decision through “spreading of alternatives,” or increasing their liking for the chosen option and decreasing their liking for rejected options ([Brehm, 1956](#); [Festinger, 1957](#)). People thus reduce the dissonance that might characterize a difficult choice by shifting their attitudes to be consistent with their choices. [Brehm and Cohen \(1962\)](#) suggested that commitment is a necessary condition for this dissonance reduction process to take place. If maximizers are less committed than satisficers to their decisions, we argue, they should experience less cognitive dissonance. Recognizing the appeal of foregone alternatives is less inconsistent when one has not fully committed to a choice. Thus, a lack of commitment to decisions is expected to keep maximizers from viewing their selected option more favorably after a choice, a well-established consequence of a committed decision.

2. Overview of the present studies

We conducted two studies to explore whether maximizers commit less to their choices and are less likely to show benefits of choice commitment than satisficers. In Study 1, we developed scales to measure a self-reported tendency to commit to decisions and examined the correlation between two commitment avoidance strategies and maximizing tendencies. In Study 2, we employed a typical spreading of alternatives paradigm and gave participants the opportunity to rank posters in order of their preference, choose a poster to take home from those ranked in the middle of the set, and then re-rank all posters. We expected these studies to show that maximizers report engaging in commitment avoidance strategies more often, show less “spreading of alternatives” after choice, and consequently show less satisfaction with their choice than satisficers.

3. Study 1

Study 1 was designed to explore whether maximizers are less comfortable committing to their choices than are satisficers. This study also draws from past research suggesting that people report that they prefer to retain the possibility of changing their mind after making a decision, even though this preference robs people of the dissonance reduction that accompanies closed options and,

as such, leads to lowered choice satisfaction ([Gilbert & Ebert, 2002](#)). Participants were asked to complete two scales, created for this study, designed to measure commitment avoidance. Participants were next told about a hypothetical study in which students were able to choose a poster to take home as a thank you gift for participation. They were asked whether they would prefer to be in a version of the study in which they had to fully commit to their choice (i.e., they would not be allowed to change their mind after selecting a poster) or a version in which they could avoid psychologically committing to the choice (i.e., they could exchange their poster if they later changed their mind). We anticipated that maximizing would predict reports of engaging in commitment avoidance strategies. We also anticipated that maximizing would predict a preference for the version of the poster study in which participants were not forced to commit to their choice.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Eighty-six undergraduates (40 women) participated in exchange for course credit in an introductory psychology course. Participants were, on average, 20.0 years old ($SD = 1.9$). They were 83% White, 7% Black, 1% Asian, and 6% multiracial. The remaining 4% did not indicate ethnicity.

4.2. Procedure

Upon arriving at the laboratory, participants completed the 13-item Maximization scale ([Schwartz et al., 2002](#)). It asks participants to rate their agreement with statements such as “I never settle for second best” and “Whenever I’m faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren’t present at the moment” on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree), $\alpha = .72$. They were next asked to complete two scales, created for this study, designed to measure a tendency to avoid decision commitment. In the Preference to Keep Options Open scale ([Appendix A](#)), participants rated their agreement, on 7-pt scales, with 6 items such as “When I go on a trip, I often pack more than one outfit for each day/event. I want to bring enough clothes that I have multiple options when I get dressed each day.” The items were averaged to create an overall measure of need to keep options available ($\alpha = 0.67$). Participants also completed the Decision Commitment scale ([Appendix B](#)) for which they rated their agreement with 11 items measuring a tendency to avoid committing to a choice by retaining the option to change their minds. For example, participants were asked to rate their agreement with items such as “I really don’t like ‘all sales final’ signs – I need to be able to change my mind” and “Once I make a choice, that’s it. I don’t tend to change my mind,” $\alpha = .76$.

Participants were next asked to imagine a study in which participants would choose one of seven posters to take home. They were told about two versions of the study, counterbalanced for order. In one version, participants would be welcome to change their mind and select a different poster even after the experiment was over. In the other version, participants would not be able to change their mind about the poster. Participants were asked to indicate which version they preferred and, separately, rate the strength of their preference on scales ranging from 1 (very slightly prefer) to 7 (very strongly prefer).

5. Results

To explore whether maximizers are less willing to commit to decisions than satisficers, we calculated correlations between par-

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